



# Building an Alternative Model for Research Administration

By Heather Cody

Rising operational expenses, funding challenges and rapid technology innovations have motivated research leaders in higher education and healthcare to re-imagine their traditional business model. The rapid shift to virtual settings in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit disruptive, demonstrated that there is ample opportunity to work faster and more cost-effectively.

Just as institutions rely on collaboration with government, private sector and community organizations to accelerate research discovery, external partnerships can play a significant role in strengthening research administration. Whether for federal awards management or sponsored clinical trials, outsourcing administrative functions empowers research teams to optimize existing resources, better engage employees and support long-term growth.

## Making the Case for Outsourcing

Collaborating with experts outside of your institution who understand the nuances of research administration can help in-house teams be more

efficient and creative. When institutions shift administrative tasks to external partners, they remove significant financial and regulatory burdens from their staff and create more resilient operations — mitigating risk even in the event of staff turnover or leave.

The key to effectively making the business case for outsourcing is to communicate and quantify its possible impacts. Helping leaders and existing research staff understand the quality, accountability and efficiency gains associated with outsourcing can mitigate concerns over shifting certain functions off-site.

### Benefits of Outsourcing for Research Institutions

- Access to industry experts who specialize in research administration
- Retention of institutional knowledge and other issues associated with staff turnover
- Improves service levels to investigators
- Optimizes the value of clinical trial management systems (CTMS)
- Increases efficiencies and reduces backlogs
- Improves financial performance
- Increases pre- and post-award management timelines
- Optimizes budgeting and cost recovery

- **Target activation times.** Shorter activation times contribute to better financial performance, increased patient enrollment and greater investigator satisfaction. Outsourcing standardized processes streamlines negotiation timelines and brings down your time to activation.
- **Optimize your technology investments.** Clinical trial management systems (CTMS) require significant capital investment. Although a CTMS offers the promise of structured patient tracking, increased research compliance and improved financial management, these benefits depend on full system adoption. Outsourcing maximizes the return on investment of existing technologies through accurate study builds that capture patient activity and ensure proper accounts receivable management.
- **Keep pace with industry benchmarks.** Research is a core value to many institutions, but it often brings financial risk. As healthcare costs rise, it is essential to understand the impact on clinical trial expenses. Outsourcing budget development brings a new emphasis on identifying costs and ensuring the financial viability of research.
- **Know your cost of turnover.** Review the time spent recruiting, understand the average duration of an open position, and evaluate the loss of productivity. Outsourcing shifts this burden and frees teams' capacity to focus on the core mission: research.

The key to proving a positive return on this investment lies in the ability to track real-time data. With outsourcing partnerships in place, institutions can tap into objective insights about their research administration performance, productivity and timelines that can support future operational and financial decisions

## Refocusing Resources on Mission-Driven Activities

[Turnover is a major concern](#) for most research institutions today. Leaders have trouble recruiting top talent and keeping them, which leads to capacity

concerns and staff taking on extra tasks they may not be trained to complete.

A critical advantage of outsourcing certain administrative tasks is that it allows internal resources to focus on conducting quality research, enhancing research capabilities, increasing community awareness and growing the research program. Further, outsourcing can be scaled to meet fluctuating research demands in real time.

### Functional Areas That Can Be Outsourced

- Contract Negotiation
- CTMS Data Entry
- Coverage Analysis
- Billing and Regulatory Compliance
- Claims Review
- Invoicing and Accounts Management
- Sponsored Projects Financial Reporting

Short-term spikes in research portfolio needs (as many institutions experienced in response to COVID-19) can strain staff capacity and cause delays. Institutions with fixed staff models have limited flexibility to add new staff to accommodate a temporary influx of work. These institutions must also absorb staff costs when research volume slows, without the benefit of productivity toward new research moneys.

When communicated effectively and implemented successfully, outsourcing can augment — not replace — existing employees and reinforce the financial viability of research programs. Reducing the burden of back-office documentation and coordination leads to greater opportunities for researchers. Staff members can contribute more to developing their research portfolio and designing new, innovative research methods. In turn, this better positions institutions to secure project funding and attract high-caliber talent in the future.

## Key Takeaways

By outsourcing select administrative operations, research institutions can build more resilient business models and better fulfill their mission. To do so, leaders must:

### Think differently.

Develop a quantifiable business case to shift internal mindsets and perceptions about outsourcing, positioning these relationships as a way to optimize rather than replace internal resources.

### Plan differently.

Identify the administrative activities that research staff spends the most time on now. Prioritize a few to outsource first to help the team acclimate.

### Act differently.

Start tracking internal metrics (such as coverage analysis turnaround duration, margin improvements and clinical trial startup times) to better understand and convey the impact outsourcing has on your operations.



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